

## **From Cornfield to Courtroom**

**Jim Cummings**

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Growing up on a farm near St. Paul, L. Mark Bailey didn't dream of becoming a judge. Even when he graduated from North Decatur High School in 1975, sitting on the bench someday seemed more like a leisurely activity than a career.

Somewhere along the line, all of that changed. Bailey received his bachelor's degree from the University of Indianapolis in 1978 and a jurisprudence doctorate from Indiana University-Indianapolis in 1982. After several years of private practice from 1982-90, he became the judge of Decatur County Court for a year. The Indiana legislature renamed that judgeship and Bailey was tabbed Decatur Superior Court judge from 1992-98, winning reelection twice. From there, his career continued on the fast track and Bailey was appointed by Gov. Frank O'Bannon to sit on the Indiana Court of Appeals First District, where he works today.

Despite his quick climb up the legal ladder, Bailey has always found time to help out in causes he feels strongly about. It was for his dedication to the law and the people that are affected by it that he was recently recognized.

The Indiana Pro Bono Commission hosted its annual celebration event, the Randall T. Shepard Dinner, at French Lick Springs Spa in October. More than 100 judges, lawyers and dignitaries were present for the gathering. One of the highlights of the event was the presentation of the first-ever Randall T. Shepard award for excellence in pro bono work. Bailey received the award for his three years of volunteer work at Indiana Pro Bono Commission.

The award was named after the chief justice of the Indiana Supreme Court to honor his statewide vision on justice. The qualifications for the award were based upon demonstrated dedication to the innovative development and delivery of legal services to the poor in one of the 14 pro bono districts of Indiana.

"This award came as a real surprise to me. It is truly an honor. Just being the first chair of the commission which began the implementation of the pro bono process was somewhat humbling. It took a lot of hard work by all of the committee members to make this a reality," Bailey said. "It also takes a commitment by all of the state's lawyers to make sure that every individual can have their day in court. It is on their behalf that I accepted the award. It is so important that the courts remain open to all citizens not just the rich."

Although this award will now be handed out annually, Bailey was selected for several years of his commitment. In being named the original chairman of the Indiana Pro Bono Commission three years ago, he led the 21-member board to create a structure that would embrace Shepard's pro bono ideals from beginning.

"Judge Bailey was chosen because he should be looked at as the representative of all future winners. Those recipients should strive to follow his example. He dedicated three years of his life to creating the framework of the Indiana Pro Bono Commission as it was set up by Indiana Code 6.5," said Jennifer Konomos, executive director of the Indiana Pro Bono Commission. "He is a joy to work with and is very professional. He's dedicated to justice and ensuring that every individual has the ability to take their legal issues to court regardless of their social stature."

To date, the IPBC has contributed more than \$1.3 million to help provide civil legal services to the poor.

"Bailey is very patriotic and proved that by dedicating three years of his life to this cause. His mission was to make sure that no one was left behind in our legal system. Because of him lawyers are lining up every day to be part of what he created. This is just a wonderful office to be part of," Konomos said.

The IPBC has received praise from legal offices nationwide. When it was created, it was the first of its kind in the country. Recently, the state of Maryland has created a similar program after the model created in Indiana.

Perhaps the most glowing comments on Bailey's philanthropy came from the man after whom the award was named.

"Judge Bailey has taken the lead in creating this program that helps people who cannot afford a lawyer for civil litigation. People from Indiana, related to the project, are often asked to speak nationally about our system," Shepard said. "That is a great compliment to Bailey and to Indiana. Many types of civil litigation involve things that are dear to us. Our homes, jobs and families can be at stake. These are important issues dear to him. He's a decent self effacing person who works hard at being a judge. We're all better off because he is in that position."

Bailey still seems to have a hard time accepting that the award was really given to him.

"These are the ideals I used when I was in private practice. As a trial judge I am always happy to see equity in the courts. It is when we have competent counsel representing both litigants, regardless of money, that the system works best. I look at it as a form of homeland security which has become so prevalent lately," Bailey said. "We need to ensure that the third branch [the judiciary] of the government is working for everyone. I'm so pleased that I was recognized for my efforts, I just can't take all of the credit. So many people were involved in this process. I also think this looks good for Decatur County. I have the highest regard for their judicial system."